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ABSTRACT

Richard Hoggart calls for "creative reading"--meaning "recognizing that some books are better than others." Those influenced by Paulo Freire call for "critical reading," meaning that what matters is that readers are encouraged to "read the word and the world." Hoggart and Freire give a clear idea of what they think the adult who reads critically can do, but they present their readers as "finished products." But what is it that a child who is learning to read critically does when he/she reads, and how can this be encouraged? An ongoing ethnographic study of reading practices in English elementary schools seeks to shed light on this question. Two episodes from the reading experience of children in two different classes serve as illustrations. The first is a guided reading lesson conducted by the teacher as part of the literacy hour, and the second is a group reading session led by the researcher. Questions in the guided reading lesson are comprehension and socially-oriented questions. Neither type allows the children any control over the reading process. The dynamics of control in the researcher's group reading session are different--the power to respond, to speak, to think rests mostly with the children. Who in either of these episodes is reading critically? Probably no one, but it seems that those children who are able to articulate their thoughts as they read and who know that their comments are valued are more firmly on their way toward critical reading. (Contains 11 references.) (NKA)

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by Vivienne Smith

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Everyone's a Criminal?
Reflections on Critical Reading in the Primary Classroom

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"Readers are required to divide themselves into two parts: one which reads within the world of the text and one which calls it into question." (Traves 1994:94)

There is out there in the general ether that constitutes our educational and political idealism, a feeling that though the ability to read is important, the ability to read critically is more important still. This feeling manifests itself via the pens and word processors of a variety of thinkers, some from the world of education, some from the literary establishment and others form the government itself.

Richard Hoggart, for example, former chairman of the Book Trust, speaks for many when he bewails what he considers to be the reading habits of much of society:

"But the great majority, insofar as they read at all, go round and round, wooed on to that carousel of repetitive rubbish ceaselessly operated by the two-syllabled press and the stereotyped paperbacks." (Hoggart 1997)

He calls for "creative reading":

"That means recognising that some books are better than others, as are some minds and imaginations..."

His is an elitist vision. In it all readers reject the dross and read instead the best literature. They are therefore open to the civilising and moral lessons that stand available for the taking (Hoggart 1998). Those who take on those lessons will find their lives and their thinking enhanced.

Those voices influenced by the writing of Paulo Freire call for critical reading too, but they mean something quite different. They are persuaded that what matters is that readers are encouraged to 'read the word and the world' (Freire and Macedo1987). Texts are seen as the subjective products of society. The reader who can deconstruct the text, and identify its underlying ideology is empowered because he can reject that ideology if he so wishes.

There is an interesting bi-polarisation in these positions. For Hoggart, the text is all important. It is a powerful instrument that has the potential to change the malleable reader, for good or for bad. The reader must learn to detect quality, and allow himself to be seduced by it. For Freire, the reader needs to be more powerful than the text. He needs to be able to see where it is coming from and harness it, lest it controls him. Both routes lead to a better world.

In the rather less heady world of the English Primary School, ideas of this sort manifest themselves more gently. Wray and Lewis (1997) writes pragmatically about children learning to read information texts:

"The fact is that all texts are located in a particular set of social practices and understandings. They involve choices. Critical reading involves an explicit examination of these choices and hence the particular social understandings and values underlying texts." p104

And so does Meek (1997):

> "Critical reading soon detects the writer's underlying assumptions about the nature of science, about the humanity or exclusiveness of mathematics or what counts as neutral in any context."

But the enriching power of literature is necessary:

> "To learn to read better than ever before, as they surely must, children need space and time to think about what they are

reading and also about reading itself. This means that texts of worth, literature especially, must be moved to the centre, to become the core of the reading curriculum." (Meek 1998)

Here is a rather different critical literacy. While it echoes Hoggart's concern for the centrality of literature, it shifts power away from texts towards the readers, who are enjoined to 'think about what they are reading and about reading itself.' It values reflection, and through it, the reader and the text come to share power. The reader controls the process of reading and the text is allowed to work.

Even the official voices of education call for critical reading, though these voices are harder to place ideologically. Hertrich (OFSTED 1997) reports that in some schools pupils in Key Stage 2 'read uncritically a narrow range of texts'. Even the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE 1998:3) insists, (as an afterthought?) that a literate eleven year old should through, reading be able 'to develop …critical awareness',

The difficulty with both these statements is that they offer no very clear idea of what 'critically' or 'critical awareness' means, or, more importantly, what it looks like in the primary classroom. And while Hoggart and Freire give us a clear idea of what they think the adult who reads critically can do, they present their readers as 'finished products'. Those of us involved in the education of children as readers need to know about the process. What is it that a child who is learning to read critically does when she reads and how can we encourage this?

For the last year or so, I have been involved in an ethnographic study of reading practices in primary schools in the hope of shedding light on this question. My research has taken me into three very different primary schools and in each I have followed the fortunes of a group of pupils over three terms. The National Literacy Strategy was introduced in all of these schools during this time, and now, the children, who were all in year 2 when the research started, are nearing the end of year 3.

During those three terms, I got to know the children well. I spent hours in their classrooms. I watched them play and observed their lessons. I worked with them, talked to them, made friends with them. I helped them with spellings, with maths work, with painting and sewing and with anything else that was going on. I read with them individually and in groups. I did exactly what the class teacher wanted when I was asked, and when I was not, I followed the rhythms of the research the demands of the ideas that were generated by it.

In the paragraphs that follow I want to present two episodes from the reading experience of children in one class from one of these schools. The first is a guided reading lesson conducted by the teacher as part of the literacy hour, and the second is a group reading session led by me. Two questions need to be kept in mind as these descriptions are read. The first is this: what do these children do as they read? The second is: who, if anyone is reading critically?

Guided reading with the teacher.

Eight children, the teacher and myself sit around a large table. Everyone except me has a copy of Superpooch and the Missing Sausages. I look over Geraldine's shoulder and attempt to share hers. This is the group of readers judged by the teacher to be least competent. I have been specifically invited to observe.

The teacher begins by asking the children to find a certain page. This takes time. Eventually, everybody is ready and the children and teacher survey the final two pages of the last story they read together. "Who can explain how Superpooch solved the crime?" she asks.

Joanna's hand shoots into the air and waves about enthusiastically.

"Oooh, Oooh" she moans. She is bursting to answer.

"Don't guess, Joanna. Check the answer." says the teacher, and asks someone else. She is given a sketchy retelling of the denouement and accepts it. "And what words does he say?"

"Bones and Biscuits" supply the children.

"It turns him into Superpooch!" adds Joanna.

The teacher asks them to find the words in the text and for a moment there is a low mumbling noise while the children search the page. 'Bones and Biscuits' is printed in big letters. They all find it and point. When the teacher is satisfied, she says:

"Now who can find me the sentence that tells you about the big dog?" and again searching begins.

It is time for the children to read some new text. The teacher sets them off reading around the table. The children read a sentence or two each, sometimes a short paragraph. Every so often the teacher intervenes, sometimes with a question to check the children are following the story: Who owns the toyshop? Who is worried? Sometimes she asks them to look at a particular word. 'Understand' is broken down

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into 'under' and 'stand' and the reader praised for decoding it. No mention is made of the language of the text, which both teases and supports the reader: "An ordinary dog on an ordinary day. Maybe. Maybe not."

Geraldine catches my eye and slowly pulls the plasters off her arm. I wince. The teacher praises all the children for working hard and various of them for reading well. She gives a short lecture on the need to go back in the text when you don't understand something, even when reading alone, and the session ends.

Group Reading with me.

Six children from the 'middle ability' reading group leave the classroom and come with me into the entrance hall. They bring chairs with them and arrange them in a circle. We have been working in this way for a term or more.

We look first, in some detail, at books the children have brought in from home. I introduce a book of mine. It is Julian, Secret Agent by Ann Cameron. I want to know what they will make of the playful language at the beginning of this book and what hints they will pick up from the first chapter about the content of the rest of it.

Even before we begin to read, Karen begins to talk about the text. I open the book at the first page and she sees a picture, the sun in bed and clouds fighting:

"Weather. We're doing about that."

I read the first sentence and am interrupted.

Peter: The sun can't stay in bed!

James: The clouds must be its pillow.

June: It must be really grey!

Liam leans across, reads the next sentence and laughs aloud. He reads it to the others and they share his delight. We speculate about how it could rain rubber boots and submarines and pirate ships.

The children in the story decide it is too wet to leave the post office.

Liam: They could go out in the rain. I do.

Cara: (looking at the picture) No. They haven't got any coats.

I read on and there are few comments until we get to the wanted posters.

One criminal has stolen $753.25 all in quarters.

Peter: It must be in Spain. They have pesetas there!

James is not so sure. When the second criminal steals dollars too, he is confident.

James: It's American. It says dollars.

The third miscreant is called Mildred.

Peter: Mildred. Mildred Hubble.

Karen: The Worst Witch!

Peter: Only she's not anymore. I watch it on the television.

This Mildred is a teacher, turned to crime. I read the words of Gloria-in-the-story. "How could a teacher become a criminal?" and wait for a reaction. There isn't one.

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me: What do you think about that? Could a teacher be a criminal?

I wait for an answer. At last Peter has one

Peter: Everyone's a criminal.

There is a short silence. He appears to be weighing his words.

Peter: No. That's not right, … something....

But no-one can help him in this, so we move on. They have more to say about how far is too far, a matter which concerns the children in the story. The real children all want to tell where they are allowed to go alone and to imagine the consequences of transgression. They all agree that their parents would be furious.

The chapter is coming to an end. I read the last words:

" 'Julian,' Gloria said. 'What trouble could we get into?'"

James: Oh no! They are going to get into trouble!

Me: Are they? What might happen?

Both James and Cara suggest that the children will go too far and find it difficult to get home. The others say nothing. If they have remembered the children's determination to catch criminals, and see a possible story here, they do not suggest it.

I am still interested in the way the passage has been put together. I wonder if the children have followed the logical progression of the chapter and whether the jokey beginning has persuaded them to look for humour in the rest of the book.

Me: Why do you think this story began with the bit about rain?

June: If it hadn't been raining, they wouldn't have stayed in the post office and they wouldn't have read the posters.

I am impressed, but not satisfied. The children are becoming restless, but I try again:

Me: What do you think about the way it began though? What was all that about rubber boots and submarines for? Why didn't it just say "It was raining"?

June: It would have been boring! You have to make the beginning of stories interesting so people want to read on. You need to put in adjectives to make it interesting!

As I reread my field notes, what comes screaming through the pages at me from these episodes and from many others like them, is the difference they show: for there is enormous difference here in the roles played by the children and in what is expected of them as readers.

Let's take the session led by the teacher first. Here we see a reading lesson that is tightly controlled. The teacher sets the pace and the agenda and all interactions are initiated by her. The children are kept involved and interested.

The teacher achieves this mostly by use of questioning and her questions seem to fall into two categories. The first and most straight forward type, are comprehension questions. These are textually specific and are situated entirely within the world of the story. Who owns? Who is? Why is? They test whether the children are following the text and whether they are making appropriate sense from it. They are questions with black and white answers and there is no room for negotiation.

The second type of question is more socially orientated. Although these questions do refer the children to the text, their primary aim seems to be to direct activity. They operate within the classroom rather than within the text itself. So, the teacher asks: Who can find? Who can explain? Can you see...? These are instructions as much as they are questions and they have no real answer apart from I can. They tell the children what to do. The teacher uses them not so much to discover which children can find a particular phrase, or who can explain it, but to ensure that everybody is with her, 'on task' and following her understanding of what matters in this story.

Neither of these types of question allows the children any control over the reading process. Both direct the children to the text and

expect them to find there right answers, that is the answer predetermined by the teacher. There is no room for wonder or speculation or ambiguity. Joanna's enthusiasm is curbed. Don't Guess. Check the text. Find what is there. Find what I have found already. This is what reading is.

When the teacher moves the children on to read the text, we see her concerns are the same. Still it is the surface detail of the text that matters and the children's attention to it. They are praised for fluency and accuracy in decoding the text. They stop and start as the teacher determines and look at the words she selects. There is no discussion of the language of the text or of its content at a level beyond basic comprehension.

Taken on its own terms this is a successful session. The children behave like readers and enjoy the text. They are actively involved in the process of reading. They search the text, follow the text and answer questions about it. But their reading is closed, for they are not encouraged to explore. The only reading permitted is the teacher's reading. The children are not allowed the possibility of making meaning for themselves.

It has to be made clear before we begin to look at my reading interactions with the children that my task is easier. I stand towards them in a different, less formal relationship than any teacher could maintain, and I have the luxury and privilege of being a visitor to their classroom. I am not responsible for the day to day discipline of the class and I do not need to justify to anyone these children's development as readers. All this will have influenced the way the class teacher worked in the episode above just as much as did her beliefs about reading. I am free in a way she is not.

Most clearly, the dynamics of control in my group reading session are different. Although I retain overall control in that I provide the text, do most of the reading and can end the session as I wish, the power to respond, to speak and to think, rests mostly with the children. They know they may interrupt when they have something to say and that when they do, they will be heard.

In the few comments and interactions recorded above, there is much to be gleaned about how these children go about making meaning from story. Here there is only room for some of it. I will concentrate on the wide-ranging nature of the children's responses and the role that questions play in encouraging them.

First the nature of their responses: the range of reference these children draw on to make sense of the story is vast. Here is everything from Karen's casual reminder of the class topic, to morality. Peter and James show they can enter into the logical play of the opening metaphor and June shows she understands it. Real, 'lived' experience occurs in the comments about rain and in the discussion about 'too far.' Cara shows she knows how to read pictures, and knowledge of other stories provides the intertextual link with Mildred Hubble and ideas for the possible continuation of the story.

Two exchanges are worth examining in more detail. The first is the peseta/dollar conversation, and it is James' part in it that I want to consider. What is going on in his mind between the first mention of the word dollar and Peter's comment, and its second occurrence a page or so later? He was surely following the story, or he would not have noticed the word the second time, but simultaneously, I suggest, he was thinking, searching his mind for the word dollar. Something to do with money, something foreign, but not Spain. He can't place it. He waits, he thinks, then the word occurs again and he remembers. America! And excitedly, he tells us.

Then Peter's criminal tendencies. What is he thinking of when he tells us that everyone is a criminal? He says it then rejects it. He appears to be searching for an aphorism, some little phrase he has heard that sets the world in order, that sheds light on the human condition. It impressed him, and he knows it is relevant, but it won't come. He tries and we all wait while he thinks, but we can't help; he gives up.

What all the children are doing, and these two in particular, is something more active, more involved, more committed than anything anyone was encouraged to do in the Superpooch session. I want to look briefly at the role questioning plays in achieving this difference.

Just as in the former episode all the questions here come from the adult, this time from me, in role as teacher. As before, they act in a way that asserts control, and shifts a previous agenda to the new one that the questioner wants to address. We both, predominantly, ask questions that appear to be about text.

But the nature of my questions is fundamentally different again. I ask not what is? but What do you think? These questions draw on the text, but the answers are to be found in the children themselves. The power of knowing the answer, and by implication, of making meaning, rests with them.

This power is implicit in the way these children respond to the text, for not once does one of them asks a question. Their comments suggest that questions have been asked: Where is this story happening? Where else have I heard that? but they are asked in the children's heads. With this text, they have the confidence and the power to answer for themselves. They do not need to ask each other, or to defer to my authority as a more experienced reader. They take on the responsibility of making meaning themselves.

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Sometimes I throw in a question to challenge their thinking. Then that responsibility changes, for the children are no longer alone. They have to take on the agenda that is in my mind. I invite them into dialogue, to share their thoughts on that subject and we make meaning together. It is dangerous and difficult. It is one thing for James to make a personal discovery about dollars, another to share the uncertainty of an unfamiliar idea and make interpersonal meaning. Only Peter is prepared to wonder aloud if teachers can be criminals. Only June even attempts to consider why the book begins as it does.

Her final remark, about adjectives, is wonderful and worthy of more notice. Why, I wonder, does she make it? Is she telling me that she has thought hard enough already, and that I should behave like a teacher? Is it the answer that she thinks teachers want, that I want? Does she believe it? I think she does. I think she believes it in the way that children do believe, unquestioningly, many of the 'facts' that teachers tell them. The worry is that those 'facts', those closed ideas about what reading is, and what is important in a text, can limit the children, can stop them discovering significance and taking on responsibility for themselves.

Who then, in either of these episodes is reading critically? That depends, of course, on what you think critical reading is. Where the writers mentioned at the beginning of this article, despite all their differences, agree, is that there is something evaluative and metacognitive about critical reading. The reader who reads critically is aware of the process of that reading and evaluates not just the text, but how he is reading it and the effect it is having on him. Do any of the children do this?

I suggest the answer is no. At the moment none of them is reading in this way. However, it seems that those children who are able to articulate their thoughts as they read, who know, because their comments are valued, that reading is a wide-ranging and exploratory practice, and that meaning is personal and interpersonal, are more firmly on the way towards critical reading than the rest.

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